

April 27, 2006

**Statement of Specialist Frank Mangum
Alabama Army National Guard
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Thank you for inviting me here today to testify before the committee. I am here not for the purpose of bashing anyone, but in the hope that my story may benefit other Army National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers returning from fighting the Global War on Terrorism. I sincerely hope that this testimony will help improve the financial and medical care given to returning soldiers.

Combat Assignment and Injury

My name is, Frank Mangum Jr., a former specialist in the Alabama Army National Guard assigned to the 279th Signal Battalion. I was a 35E COMSEC/RADIO Repairer. I am now honorably discharged from the service for an injury I received in the line of duty in Iraq on April 2, 2004.

I am writing this testimony to try and help people understand the cracks in the system that is currently in place to provide for deployed Guard and Reserve soldiers, and to help fill in those cracks. It is also an expression of my love for this country and the Armed Forces that helped to make this nation great, and who guard its greatness. I appreciate all who are working to help the soldiers and their families through difficult times and to ensure that mistakes are not repeated.

I wish to preface this statement by simply stating that in my case, if something could go wrong, it did. I feel that I am not the average case to come before you, but the exception to the rule. The average soldier does not have as many problems as seem to have plagued me.

I began my Army National Guard career in December 2001, signing up just after 9/11 in the hope of serving my country through a very difficult time. I went through Basic Training at Fort Benning, Georgia, and Advanced Individual Training at Fort Gordon, Georgia, from January 2002 until February 2003. I attended normal weekend drills for 7 months and in late September 2003, our company was addressed by the Brigade Commander. He was there to ask for volunteers for deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom. I volunteered without hesitation or regret.

In October 2003, I was assigned to B Company, 279th Signal Battalion. In November 2003, my unit arrived for pre-deployment training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where we remained until January 2004. We deployed to Camp Udairi, Kuwait, and remained at Camp Udairi for most of February conducting additional training and adapting to the climate. In late February 2004, we convoyed across the border into Iraq. During this three-day convoy we did take some light small

arms fire and one vehicle in the convoy was hit by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). Luckily, there were no injuries. We arrived at Camp Caldwell, which is located near Kirkush and Baqubah, in early March 2004. Due to some problems with tent assignments, my company slept outside for three days where we watched the other units arriving move directly into tents. When accommodations were made, we were placed into three tents. We had more than 35 soldiers in each tent with our officers and the 1st Sergeant taking one tent for themselves and operations (they were crowded too).

Camp Caldwell is also known as the Kurdish Military Training Base, and as such is a very well-developed base. There were several buildings completed and many more were under construction when we arrived. Unfortunately for us, these buildings were also being handed over to the Iraqis, even the buildings where the soldiers in the previous unit that we relieved had lived. We may have been cramped, but we still felt lucky because other fellow soldiers were still sleeping on the ground elsewhere. We even had two open KBR dining facilities, or so we thought.

I will pause here a moment to say that our unit deployed to provide communications for the 30th Heavy Separate Brigade, which fell under the command of the 1st Infantry Division (ID). That placed us under the 1st ID as well. It was no surprise that in late March 2004 we received a visit from the Commanding General of the 1st ID and his Command Sergeant Major.

They were there to inspect the camp because we had some problems with the facilities. These problems included the housing of soldiers, Morale and Welfare services, and the most pressing issue -- our bathroom facilities. There were only six portable units on site for more than 3,000 soldiers! In the process of this inspection, the Command Sergeant Major inspected the dining facilities. He then began to look at soldiers' unit patches and started to ask what unit they belonged to. Guard soldiers were instructed to fall out of the dining facility and into formation so that the Command Sergeant Major could address us. At this time we were told that the dining facilities were not to be used by Guard soldiers because our units had no contract to use them. If we did not obey this order, we would be subject to disciplinary actions in accordance with the UCMJ. We were to eat at mobile kitchens or eat Meals Ready to Eat (MREs). After we were thrown out of the dining facility, we sat and watched as day after day food was discarded because there were not enough 1st ID soldiers on Camp Caldwell to eat all of the food prepared.

During my first month in Iraq, we had no mail service and the phones and computers were still being set up. When I finally received my mail, I learned that I had not been paid for the first month of my deployment. My wife had to file an inquiry and fortunately the problem was fixed in a week and she began receiving my pay again. This was not the only problem. It also took two months to start receiving hostile fire and hardship duty pay, even though we had to scan in our military IDs to show we had entered a combat zone. We were told that this would

expedite the pay process. If it still took two months to start the extra pay, even though we scanned our military IDs when we arrived in theater, then the process should be re-evaluated for a faster method of getting the soldiers' money to the soldier and his family.

After the first month, we had a finance office open on site. This allowed us to draft money from our pay to buy things that we needed from local suppliers. This drafted money would be deducted from our paychecks on a later pay period. I have experienced debt repayments on two separate occasions where my original debt was removed twice. The first was in Iraq and it took weeks to get the money refunded. It was such a hassle to prove the first time, when it happened again at Fort Bragg where no money had been advanced to me, I decided to just let it go. I was having enough problems at the time with being overpaid and the finance office doing nothing about it, that I did not want to open another can of worms.

My injury occurred in April 2004 at Camp Caldwell, while playing soccer for physical training (PT). I dropped to one knee to block a shot, striking my right knee against a rock sticking up out of the ground. It hurt, as you can imagine, but I continued to play for another 10 minutes or so. After that I reported to work call and began to do my job. After just a few minutes of standing at the repair bench, my knee began to throb and the pain was getting so bad that I had to stop working and check it out. My knee was badly bruised, swollen, and had a large, egg-sized pouch of fluid forming on the kneecap. I went to my sergeant to inform him of my injury. He looked at my knee and took me to the medical tent on site right away.

When we arrived at the medical tent, a medic took my vital signs and inspected the injury. He quickly left to find a doctor who came in and looked at my knee. He told me that there was an orthopedist on site and he was going to send for him to look at my knee because he would feel better if someone with experience with bone and joint injuries made a diagnosis. This doctor came and conducted a physical examination of my injured knee and thought that it was just sprained. I was placed on quarters and given instructions to rest, ice the injury, keep a compression bandage on it, and keep my leg elevated. I was also given Motrin to take for pain.

After the five days of quarters, I was to return for a follow-up exam. I did as instructed and at the second exam, my knee was still swollen and bruised with very little difference. I was again placed on quarters with the same instructions for care with another follow-up to be conducted in five more days. At this exam, the swelling in my knee had decreased and the fluid was dissipating slightly, but I still had considerable pain when walking. Again, I was placed on quarters but I was given a set of crutches to walk with. I had follow-up exams every three days for another two visits.

I had had five visits with the same doctor over close to three weeks with little change in my pain level. After the last three-day follow-up, the swelling in my knee had decreased to almost normal, the fluid was still there but decreasing, but I still

had pain. A more thorough exam was conducted and I was told I had chondromalacia, or runner's knee, which is a genetic condition. I questioned why I had never had a problem with my knee before this if the problem was genetic. I was then told that the rock had merely triggered an early onset of this genetic condition. I was placed back on duty, including attending PT, but was instructed to use my crutches to walk with. I can tell you that it is very difficult to walk with crutches while wearing a Kevlar helmet, Kevlar vest, full ammo load, protective mask, and carry a weapon. That is exactly what I did for two weeks because it was my duty.

“Suck it Up and Drive On, Specialist”

After the last two weeks of walking with crutches, I was taken off medical profile, even though I was still in pain and had a small amount of fluid left on my knee. I tried to do the PT runs, but found that when I ran or walked for long distances my knee would swell and the pain would increase. I returned to the doctor after a week of trying to run or walk for PT. I was given a no running or walking for PT profile for two weeks. When the profile ran out, I again tried to run but had the same pain and swelling as before, so after another week, I again returned to the doctor. He conducted another exam at this time and told me, “It's about time for you to suck it up and drive on, specialist.” He did give me another two-week profile against running. This profile ran out and I did try to “suck it up,” going two weeks with pain and knee swelling when I ran. I still walked with a limp but was able to walk farther than I had been able to at first.

I then consulted with my sergeant about the problem and asked him what I should do. He recommended that I try to talk to the doctor and see if he would grant me a P-2 profile. This would keep me from having to run for PT for the rest of my time in Iraq, and then I would be able to get the knee examined when we returned home. So, I went back to see the same orthopedist that I had been seeing all along. This time when the doctor came into the room and saw me he asked, “Are you too stupid to understand me, specialist? I have explained to you that there is nothing else that I can do for you! If you had done this on my doorstep in Raleigh, North Carolina, I would still not be able to help you!” I then told him that my sergeant had recommended this visit and had instructed me to inquire about a P-2 profile so that I didn't have to keep running. I told the doctor that I would not bother him again if I got this profile and I would wait and see a doctor about the knee when I got back home. He blew up! He then yelled at me, telling me that I was stupid and not only was I stupid; he was also going to charge me with malingering. He then stormed out of the room saying how stupid, idiotic, and lazy some people are. I was speechless!

About a minute later the medic came in and gave me a prescription for more Motrin and told me the doctor had told him to schedule me for physical therapy to take place at Camp Anaconda, near Balad. Two days later I left in a convoy for Camp Anaconda, but we were turned back due to an insurgent attack in Baqubah. So, I was rescheduled to fly out on a helicopter two days after that.

When I arrived at Camp Anaconda, I was given quarters for the duration of my stay and told when I was to report to the hospital for physical therapy. The following morning I went to physical therapy and after being examined by the therapist, it was recommended that I remain overnight to be seen the next day by the hospital's orthopedist. When the orthopedist examined me he asked me to explain how the injury occurred and asked me to describe the symptoms that followed. He then asked for my x-rays and I told him that none had been taken. He ordered a set of x-rays that day and viewed them that afternoon. He then said that he did not see anything on the x-rays but did not like the way my knee moved during his exam. He recommended that I be evacuated to Landstuhl, Germany, where they would "fix me up". I asked if it was really necessary to go, and he advised me that if I refused treatment I would be ineligible for V.A. care later. I went but wish I had stayed.

Upon my arrival at Landstuhl on June 28, 2004, I was taken to Landstuhl Army Medical Center where I in-processed and was assigned to the local MRPU. The following morning I was taken back to the hospital for an exam by their orthopedist who picked my leg up, bent it once, and dropped it saying, "F*** it! You're going home anyway." Then he walked out and I had to follow him to find out if I could at least get an MRI done while I was there. He agreed to that and an MRI was scheduled for me the next day.

Orthopedist Orders My Medical Evacuation To Fort Bragg, North Carolina

On the day following my MRI, I was told to report back to orthopedics to pick up the results. I reported as instructed, but no results were found in the computer. I was then instructed that I would be evacuated back to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for further evaluation and treatment. This occurred on July 1, 2004, and since it was the 4th of July weekend, I was held over until the 5th.

It is important to stop here and say that when I left Camp Caldwell, I expected to just be gone a few days. All of my gear--excluding my helmet, body armor, protective mask, and weapon--was left behind. I had only the clothes on my back and one change of clothes when I arrived in Germany. I was given \$250 in Germany to purchase clothing and a suitcase, and I was given an extra pair of desert boots. I had to trust my unit to bring back my personal possessions. This went badly for me as well! When I arrived back home after my discharge, I went to get my gear at my unit. My unit had been home for two months at this time. I found that all of my stuff had been gone through and most of it had been stolen. This included a laptop computer, 120 music CDs, and much more.

I arrived in Fayetteville, North Carolina, around 11 p.m. on the 5th of July and called the contact number we had been given for pick-up from the airport to be taken to Fort Bragg. There was no answer. Another soldier who was evacuated with me then offered to have his ride take me to a local motel where I could stay

for the night and then call for pick-up in the morning. I only had \$40 on me, but it seemed that I really had no choice. The room cost \$32 and change. The next morning I called the pick-up number again, but it was wrong. I spent two hours calling to find who was supposed to pick me up. When I finally found out whom, they asked if I could just take a taxi to get to the post. I told them I was out of money, so they finally agreed to send a driver.

When I arrived on post I found that my military ID had not been returned to me in Germany where they used it to book my flight. Since it was after noon already, I asked the driver if he would take me to get a new military ID issued. He said that I had to in-process at the hospital first. I was dropped off at Womack Army Medical Center on Fort Bragg, with my luggage, and without a clue of where to go or a guide to help. I had only a piece of paper to tell me where I needed to be in the hospital to get signed off as in-processed. This was a Friday, so I did what I could, but at 3 p.m. the offices began to close. I then called for another pick-up and asked again to be taken to get an ID card. I was told I had to in-process with the MRPV first. Getting a military ID card was a pressing issue because I would not be able to go to the dining facility to eat, be able to go to a store on post to buy anything, be able to cash a check, be able to leave the post, or get back on post if I did leave. So, at the MRPV I was very sure to tell the sergeant who checked me in that I did not have an ID and that I needed to get one. He told me not to worry, that it would not take that long to in-process with the company, and they would make sure that I had an ID by close of business. I met my Platoon Sergeant and told him about my ID problem and he reassured me that I would get one before the ID section closed for the weekend at 5 p.m. Finally at 4:45 p.m., the Platoon Sergeant came back to tell me that I would not in-process the company that day because the office personnel had gone for the day. I reminded him about the ID but it was too late and the ID section had closed.

This occurred on July 6, 2004. I had not eaten all day and I only had \$7 to last all weekend. I did what I could and ate from the vending machine until Monday. It was a long weekend followed by a long Monday.

Monday began and I still had to finish all in-processing that had been missed at the hospital and finish in-processing the company. I complained again about the ID and the sergeants just laughed and asked how well I had eaten over the weekend. When I was briefed about company rules and regulations by the First Sergeant, I informed him of my problem. He gave me a counseling statement for losing my ID and then had someone drive me to get one. It was 4 p.m. on Monday, July 9th.

On Tuesday, I in-processed with the MRPV clinic and was given an appointment with a provider the following week. Then I was given a job by the MRPV. Despite my leg injury, and the limp that I still walk with, I was assigned to push patients around the hospital in wheelchairs. When I protested, I was told that I had no profile preventing me from performing that job. I further explained that I had just arrived and had not seen a doctor yet. I was told, "Then you don't have a profile yet." This was the kind of insanity that was going on when I first got to the MRPV.

When I first came into the MRPU, of all the staff, only the Company Commander and the First Sergeant were not returning injured soldiers. All of the other staff members had to do their jobs and track all of the soldiers in their charge, as well as see to their own medical care. Thankfully, this problem was solved at Fort Bragg's MRPU when the Army brought in a staff of Reservists to take over the daily platoon and staff duties.

I did push wheelchairs for a day, but a sergeant saw me and noted my limp. He contacted the MRPU and requested that I be allowed to work for him since it was obvious that I was having trouble just walking. The request was granted and I began work under this sergeant as a Health Benefits Advisor. My job was to counsel soldiers and their families about their healthcare under Tricare. I would resolve billing issues, verify Tricare accounts, and track ongoing cases with billing problems. I was in this position for five months, until a properly trained and qualified civilian was hired. I then became the Assistant Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) in Charge of Clinical Operations for Womack Army Medical Center, even though I wasn't an NCO. I was a specialist! I served in this office for six months until the time of my discharge on June 19, 2005. I was even recommended for an Army Commendation Medal for this service, but I was discharged prior to receiving it and no one seems to know how to find out if it was approved.

Shortage of Army Doctors at Fort Bragg Resulted in Many Soldiers Receiving Poor Medical Care

My medical care from the time I arrived at Fort Bragg until my departure was not the best. I will preface this with the knowledge that the Army desperately needs more doctors! The lack of adequate numbers of doctors directly corresponds with the poor care that I and many other soldiers received. As I previously stated, it took a week just to see my primary care provider. She put in a referral for orthopedics and five weeks later I got to see an orthopedist. I had had many appointments made during this five-week period for orthopedics, but every time I arrived for my scheduled appointment I was told by the receptionist, "I'm sorry, but we are unable to see Medhold soldiers today. You will have to make another appointment."

The day that I was finally seen, I was told this as well. I got mad and slapped the desktop saying, "This is unacceptable!" An officer in a lab coat walked around the corner and asked what my problem was. It turns out this officer was the doctor I was supposed to see that day. I informed him that this was my sixth appointment that had been cancelled on me because Medhold soldiers couldn't be seen that day. He then questioned the receptionist why she had turned away any Medhold soldier and she told him that she had been instructed to do so if the clinic was too busy. He corrected her and saw me immediately.

My Undiagnosed Broken Leg Results in My Medical Discharge

During his examination, this doctor explained to me that by rule he had only 90 days to evaluate, diagnose, treat, and have a prognosis for any MRPV patient. Since I had already been at Fort Bragg for about 45 days, the best he could do was get a set of x-rays taken, look to see if the results of my MRI had gotten into the computer system from Landstuhl, and give me four visits to physical therapy. He also added that I was likely to go before the medical board for discharge based on the time constraints.

Six weeks later, I had gone through my physical therapy and taken my x-rays, and was seen again. The MRI results were still not found and he could not see anything wrong with my x-rays. Based on my lack of progress in physical therapy, I was recommended for a medical discharge with a diagnosis of Chondromalacia, or runner's knee. At this time my knee was getting worse, making a grinding sound when flexed and sometimes locking up at the joint. I was still in pain.

I tried to contact my Guard unit in Alabama to see if they could help, but they would never respond to my calls. My wife tried to contact them for me and was told to tell me that I had the right number. I tried to call many times, leaving messages to call me back, without result. My MRPV Platoon Sergeant tried to call for me and he got no return calls. I gave up and waited for the Army to discharge me. I waited for eight months and was discharged.

After my discharge I was given six months of continued Tricare coverage. I put this to use by getting a good second opinion from a local orthopedist that I was referred to by my local military doctor. He ordered new x-rays and a new MRI as well as a physical exam. His first question to me was, "When did you break your right leg?" I had never injured that leg to my recollection, other than my PT injury in Iraq, 15 months earlier. He then pointed to an area of my tibia where it joins the knee to show me where the break had healed poorly. He then showed me the MRI where it could be seen that the cartilage behind my kneecap was severely damaged and that there was a tear in the meniscus as well. I had surgery close to two weeks later to remove the damaged cartilage and to remove the torn portion of the meniscus.

Thanks to this surgery my knee no longer grinds but I still have some pain. I walk with a brace on both knees and use a cane as well. Two years of limping takes its toll. I have been told that I will have knee replacement surgery one day, but that I am too young now. I feel this could have been avoided if the doctor at Camp Caldwell had simply sent me to Camp Anaconda for x-rays to begin with.

Instead, my military career ended June 19, 2005. I received a medical discharge with a zero percent disability rating. I was given a lump sum severance pay of \$11,266.20 and was told by the PEB liaison officer that the money would be in my

bank account in two to six weeks. This was just another pay problem in a long line of pay problems.

My Pay Problems Began at the Fort Bragg MRPU

I have already discussed the problems with the combat pays and the advances from pay. I had other and worse pay problems. They began back at the MRPU at Fort Bragg.

Despite in-processing with the MRPU, the hospital, and the finance office, I continued to receive hostile fire and hardship duty pay. This pay is \$325 a month combined together. I knew I would have to pay back any amount that I was overpaid, so I started reporting the overpayments to my chain of command. My Platoon Sergeant told me they were aware of the problem and that it was affecting many soldiers in the MRPU. The following month when I received the pay again, I complained again. The next morning the First Sergeant for the MRPU addressed the company, stating that several soldiers were receiving pay that did not belong to them and for anyone who was overpaid to come forward and report it to the company staff office so they could get it corrected. I followed his instructions and was told to follow my report to the company up by also telling the finance office directly. I was given a phone number to call, and the person who answered told me that the problem did not originate with Army finance but with the Guard and Reserve finance system. I was told there was nothing they could do to correct the problem. I told my Sergeant about this and he said not to worry it, it would get handled soon. The last overpayment I received was October 15, 2004, four months after my arrival at Fort Bragg.

Hardship Posed by Paycheck Deductions for Overpayments of Hardship Duty Pay

In late October 2004, we were again addressed by the First Sergeant who told us to expect the debt to start being collected soon and they would not stop taking pay until the debt was collected. On November 15, 2004, my pay was reduced from a debt collection of \$299.22 being removed from my pay. This prevented me from being able to travel home for the Thanksgiving holiday to see my wife and two children because bills don't stop for the holidays and I pay my bills. Another debt collection was taken on December 15, 2004, in the amount of \$22.66. After this deduction from my pay there were no further monies removed for debt. I did inquire about the two deductions that were taken and was told by company staff that indeed those deductions were for the overpayments I had received and since there were no further deductions I was properly paid.

Apparently, I am wrong or DFAS is wrong because I received a debt notification letter from DFAS on March 21, 2006. In the letter, DFAS states that I have a current debt of \$775. I called the phone number provided in the letter to dispute the amount. A DFAS employee told me that I must pay the full \$775 or I would

owe administrative fees and accrued interest, even if I filed a dispute and was found to be correct. At this time I still had to pay in full. If I did have a legitimate dispute and could prove it, I should send the proof in with the full payment and should my claim be correct after the DFAS investigation I would receive a refund for the difference. If I did not pay in 30 days I would incur interest and administrative charges. If I did not pay in 60 days I would face the debt being reported to the credit bureau and possibly go into collections. It was my understanding that the 60 days was to pay the entire amount back. I wonder how this debt could even happen or should have been allowed to happen. I had no part in creating the debt and did all I could do to stop it. However, now my family and I will suffer to pay back someone else's mistake with penalties and interest. This just adds insult to injury!

If the previous pay problems weren't enough, there is the matter of my severance pay. Upon my discharge I was awarded a lump sum of \$11,266.20 that was to be paid in two to six weeks after my discharge. It wasn't. After the sixth week, I went to Redstone Arsenal, my local base, and checked with the finance office there to find out what was going on. Gail, the employee that I talked to, took my information and asked me to give her a week to look into it for me and she would have an answer. She called Fort Bragg's finance office and told me that they made her feel like she did not know what she was doing. She then instructed me to go to the Inspector General's (IG) office on post and file a complaint with them. The IG took my complaint, but told me that they would have to forward it to Fort Bragg's IG for investigation because the complaint involved Fort Bragg's finance office. I was told I should hear from their IG's office in one to two weeks. I never heard from anyone.

This convinced me to file a Congressional Inquiry into this situation, which I did in January 2006, with the local office of Congressman Bud Cramer. In two weeks I began to get calls on this matter. I finally heard from the IG office two months after filing my complaint with them. It was Mr. Cawthorn of the Alabama Pay and Finance Office who was the biggest help in solving this problem. He found that the source of my problem stemmed from the fact that Fort Bragg never forwarded my discharge to the state. The last document that was sent from Fort Bragg was an extension order for the MRP. My home unit also shares the blame because they did not acknowledge my discharge when I returned home. I received the payouts on this on February 17 and 22, 2006. This problem took eight months to solve.

The slow payment of my severance pay caused my family to use up our savings after the surgery to fix some of my knee problems. When this pay finally arrived, I was forced to use part of it to pay for my follow up medical care, bills that had fallen behind due to my inability to work, and I had to pay for braces for my youngest son. I mean no disrespect, but I feel that I am working now just to pay back the government for the privilege of serving my country and daring to get injured in the process.

The final chapter to the financial side of my story ends with the aftermath of my injury. Before I was deployed to Iraq with my Guard unit, I was a sheet metal mechanic in the construction industry. I specialized in hanging HVAC ductwork. This was a physical job requiring me to climb ladders all day long. My hourly wage was between \$15 and \$17 per hour. I cannot do this anymore with a bad knee. I now make \$8 an hour as a manager for the local Burger King franchise.

Concluding Remarks

My service in Iraq cost me my health, my money, and my job. Now I'm being asked for more. Do I regret serving in the Army? Not for a minute! I would go back in if they would let me, and straight back to Iraq to boot. This is the greatest nation in the world and I would gladly give my life to defend her. I ask nothing of this nation in return except to care for me as I have cared for her.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with you. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.